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# The importance of tools. Two days with tebori master

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*The technique […] bears great time and great pain. There are very few works which can be finished in a short time, and I am keeping in mind the production of a work to leave you treasure throughout life.*

Sousyu Hayashi[1]

## Introduction: The master and his tools

Sousyu Hayashi is known to be the youngest performer of the traditional Japanese tattooing technique, widely recognized as *tebori*. The closest translation of this term into English may be 'hand engraving', which clearly states the importance of the tools used in the process and the lack of the appearance of modern, electrical equipment[2]. As the creators often underline, *tebori* differs from the modern Japanese tattoo, called *irezumi*, in relation to the time it takes to complete the pattern and the tools needed. The much longer process of completing the pattern, in the case of the first one, is intangibly connected to the appearance of a slender, hand profiled piece of bamboo with needles (*nomi*) that replaces the machine[3]. Every pierce, crowding in the ink, equals one move of the artist's hand, which requires passion, extreme focus and precision. The tools that cannot be substituted in *tebori* making process are personally prepared by the user, what takes about seven months to accomplish. Moreover, the preparation includes self-producing of the ink, which is made of pulverized charcoal or other natural ingredients (colorful pigments). Hayashi has been learning the procedure, as well as the methods of preparing all needed appliances, for over ten years, therefore he is still improving his style. During the training, the artist

1 "Hayashi Sousyu." *HADAESHI Sousyu*. http://www.sousyu.net/english/index.html. N.p., 2008. Web. 29 June 2016.

2 Ibidem.

3 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. *Japanese Tattoos: History, Culture, Design*. North Claredon: Tuttle Publishing, 2016, p. 27.

not only gained the knowledge of this unique craft, but also investigated the process from the other side, having the whole body tattooed by the master who taught him.

Thanks to the excessive appearance on the Internet, Hayashi gained popularity and became one of the most recognizable Japanese tattoo professionals. His creations can be easily found throughout the Web, as he shares all achievements on his Facebook[4] and Instagram[5] profiles. Thanks to this, he is being invited to tattoo conventions all over the world and, finally, in 2016 he visited Poland. The master took part in the 11th edition of the TattooFest Convention in Kraków[6], later on he also performed in Wrocław and Poznań. During the event, the author of this article had an opportunity to help as a translator for the artist. Benefiting from the time spent together, many hours of conversations and the closest observation of the creation process possible for the researcher from a different culture, the author was able to gain deep insight into the methods and the meaning of *tebori*.

## The development of tebori

The term *tebori* is not as recognizable among the western enthusiasts of the body art as the word *irezumi* used to describe Japanese tattooing process as a whole, without making the distinction between the methods and styles. Furthermore, the second word, according to the Japanese speakers, does not give the right impression of the greatness of the traditional tattoo art. Also, *irezumi* is used more often when one mentions modern tattoos. There exists another term, *horimono*, which is used by the tattooers more enthusiastically, as it is derived from the word *hori* (the tattoo master). In this matter, the difference between *tebori* and *horimono* terms is that the first one pertains mostly to the working technique, while the second one represents the Japanese style and unique, culture-related patterns[7]. In the 20th century writings also a new term *wabori* can be found, but the meaning stays the same as in the case of *tebori* and *horimono*[8].

According to the archaeological discoveries, the beginnings of the tattooing on the Japanese land can be dated back to the 250 B.C. (Yayoi period). Assessing the age of the geometric patterns on the ceramic figurines (*haniua*), which depict human beings, the researchers concluded that the art came to Japan together with the Chinese

[4] "Hayashi Sousyu." Sousyu Hayashi Facebook Profile. https://www.facebook.com/sousyu.hayashi?fref=ts. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 June 2016.

[5] Idem. *sousyu_hayashi*, https://www.instagram.com/sousyu_hayashi/?hl=pl. N.p., 2016. Web. 29 June 2016.

[6] *11 TattooFest 11-12.06.2016.* http://convention.tattoofest.pl/newsy/. N.p., 2016. Web. [29 June 2016]. During the Convention, every artist occupies a small box or divided space where he places his tools and promotional materials, and prepares the workplace. All gathered practitioners work at the same time, and every visitor can freely admire the process, as well as interact with the artists to gain more information about their style or projects. It is also possible to get a tattoo after booking the exact time during the event or later, in one of the hosting studios in the city.

[7] A. Jelski. *Tatuaż.* Gliwice: Wydawnictwo „Kontrowers", 2007, p. 92.

[8] B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 4.

influences[9]. The second hypothesis connects the appearance of the tattoos with the culture of Ainu people – the indigenous inhabitants of the archipelago[10]. The mysterious origins of the body decorating art in Japan resulted in creating legends and stories. In most cases, those writings revolve around the descriptions of the deeds of the famous tattooed people, like the emperor Jimmu (660–585 B.C.) who was proud of the pictures covering up his body[11]. However, as a researcher Andrzej Jelski points out, *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, two Japanese chronicles dated to the 6th century, describe only the penitentiary role of tattoos, not referring their beauty as the legends did[12]. Gathering archaeological and historical data, Jelski observes that from the Kamakura period (1185–1333) to the Edo period (1615–1868) the tattoo on the Japanese land was mainly used as a form of a punishment for the criminals, as well as a way to mark the people of low provenance. Therefore, it functioned only as a means of identification while complex, artistic patterns were at those times rarely encountered[13].

The tattoo, perceived as a form of art, appeared on the wave of the Edo period economic transformations and became a new, distinctive fashion[14]. In addition to the development and popularization of the *horimono* (or its initial form), different styles of tattooing emerged. The styles are also being described as phases of the process, because they can be used together or selected separately to cover one project. The distinctive features of the styles are mostly connected with the ways of handling the tools, inserting the ink or observing changes in the rhythm of the master's movements[15]. Among them, it is worth mentioning *hanebori*, which is a technique of shading bigger areas of the tattoo[16]. Together with *bokashibori* (also related to shading), it is considered to be the most painful part of the whole process. In those styles, in order to insert more ink, after the first punction the puncture wounds are widened by the slight upward moves of the needles[17]. To accomplish one project, *hanebori* is often combined with *imotsuki* style, characterized by the rhythmical moves of the artist's hand, which resembles the rhythm of the tattoo machine[18]. The way of handling the tools is the most important in *shamisenbori* and *tsukibori* styles. The characteristic feature of the first one is that the artist prepares his bamboo stick *nomi* in a way to make it resemble a *shamisen*[19]

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9 A. Jelski. op. cit., p. 89.
10 Ibidem, p. 90.
11 Ibidem.
12 Ibidem, p. 90–91.
13 Ibidem, p. 91.
14 Ibidem, p. 92.
15 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 27.
16 D. Buisson. *Japan Unveiled: Understanding Japanese Body Culture.* London: Hachette Ilustrated, 2003, p. 104.
17 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 27.
18 Ibidem.
19 *Shamisen* is a traditional Japanese string musical instrument which is hold as a guitar but requires a pick to perform in a proper way.

pick and holds it as a pencil[20]. In contrast, the recognizable feature of the second style is that the *nomi* is much longer than in other cases[21].

The biggest popularity of the artistic tattoo in Japan was noticed between the 18th and 19th century, when it spread from the middle class to aristocracy. It was not only displayed in public places without repercussions, but also became the main subject of the festivals and contests[22]. However, the golden era of the tattoo art faded away when it was banned by the Emperor Matsuhito in 1868, considered as opposed to the Confucian teachings[23]. From that time, permanent body decorating was illegal in Japan until the end of the World War II. The prohibition was finally lifted under the pressure of the American military service members who were quartered in Japan, as they did not consider their western style tattoos to be morally and socially incorrect[24]. Although since then *horimono* was not banned, from the point of view of the majority of Japanese people it should not be freely displayed. Popular thinking connects the signs on the body with the organized crime and outsiders acting against the law. Visiting Japan, one can find the signs with a crossed picture of a tattoo in front of the public baths, gyms, swimming pools, and even some restaurants. Even though permanent body decorations are popular as part of the globalized cultural market, the practice in Japan is still stigmatized and not considered to be of a great value for society. Nowadays, the tattooers work in a legal gray zone, as in 2001 Japanese Ministry of Health announced that "tattooing is a medical procedure […] only a licensed health care professional can penetrate the skin with a needle and insert pigment"[25]. The problem lies in the fact that the government does not issue particular licenses for the tattoo artists[26], so it is impossible to legalize the procedure without obtaining a professional degree.

It should also be indicated that, under the western influences, the sizes and designs of the projects changed. While during the golden era of the *horimono* the most popular patterns, called body-suit tattoos (*sobori*)[27], covered almost all invisible parts of the body (legs, back and hands to the elbows), in the 20th century the rise of the one-point tattoo[28] was being observed[29]. The time after the War brought also one more important change: the tattooing machine came to Japan[30]. Simple and fast to accomplish designs, it became the first choice of the clients. In this case it can be observed that the machine completely changed the world of the Japanese tattoos,

20 Ibidem.
21 Ibidem.
22 A. Jelski. op. cit., p. 95.
23 Ibidem.
24 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 7.
25 Ibidem.
26 Ibidem.
27 M. Poysden, M. Bratt. *A History of Japanese Body Suit Tattooing*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2006.
28 One-point tattoo is a small picture that can be accomplished by the artist during one session.
29 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 9.
30 Ibidem, p. 10. The tattooing machine was invented by an American tattooist Samuel O'Reilly who patented the design in 1891.

making the traditional hand engraving less and less popular over time. Even though, thanks to the tattoo conventions and the popularization on the Internet, *tebori* style is still admired as the most difficult and spectacular method, it is not the primary way in which the Japanese people (and the visitors of the country) decorate their bodies. Nowadays *horimono* is a beautiful tradition preserved by a few passionate people who believe that to create the most precious tattoo, a great amount of time should be devoted. Also, what Hayashi pointed out during the Convention in Kraków[31], it is impossible to show the meaning of the *tebori* technique on a small, one-point project. That is why he prefers to design larger pictures, even though he does not meet the general needs of the potential customers. However, as it is relatively unusual to find the customer who wishes to cover his whole body with only one design, to cultivate the method Hayashi has to fulfill the market requirements by presenting the portfolio with smaller, as well as less spectacular, designs.

## The process

As it was mentioned at the beginning, the uniqueness of *tebori* style is attributed to the handmade tools used by the artist. *Hari* (short and sharp needles) affixed to *nomi* (a slender bamboo stick) by a silk string build the main utensil needed in the process[32]. However, the inks are equally important, as the duration of the pattern on the skin mostly depends on them. The preparation of the tools to perform the process takes from one to even two hours. The pulverized charcoal that is transported in the form of thick rectangular bars has to be soaked and turned into liquid ink by being rubbed on a wooden mat. The artist also sterilizes the needles before starting the operation, which is easier since the *tebori* master Horiyoshi III invented the steel *nomi* with removable *hari* ends[33]. However, Sousyu Hayashi still prefers using bamboo tools, so the preparations take almost two hours – instead of simply changing the endings, the Japanese artist has to clean *nomi* with the highest precision. The number of needles attached to the bamboo stick varies, depending on the stage of the tattoo making process. For example, *nomi* designed especially for shading can consist of even twenty-seven small needles, while for coloring the artists normally use no more than eighteen needles[34]. In consequence, the tattooer who chooses the bamboo style sticks has to spend a great amount of time to sanitize all his tools.

Another distinctive feature of the *tebori* technique is time, since the hand engraving cannot be performed as fast as the tattoo machine moves. For instance, Hayashi needs over fifty sessions (three hours each) to accomplish a pattern covering the customer's back. Certainly, it could be finished faster, but the master considers the pain

[31] All statements of Sousyu Hayashi presented in this article were recorded during the 11th edition of the TattooFest in Kraków on 11–12 June 2016.

[32] B. Ashcraft, B. Hori. op. cit., p. 27.

[33] Ibidem.

[34] Ibidem.

that the client has to bear and decides to divide his work process[35]. Moreover, the Japanese tattoo master stated that he avoids being in a hurry to fully experience the beauty of the process. He also invites the client to contemplate with him. As it was mentioned above, for every session the preparation of the ink takes about two hours. However, it is not the only time-consuming activity performed before the exact action. The tattooer transfers the sketch of the pattern from the paper to the body part not by using carbon paper, as the modern artists do, but by drawing his project directly on the customer's skin. Although the *tebori* master avails himself by looking on the prepared project, the final design of the picture emerges with consideration of body imperfections, as well as its shape. Depending on the size of the depiction, the drawing process takes from one to two hours.

The customers and the artists claim that the hand engraving process brings a greater amount of pain than tattooing with the use of a machine[36]. *Tebori* tattoo requires putting the ink into the deeper layer of skin than in a modern way of decorating the body. It makes the process more painful, but also offers a benefit of longer lasting colors: there is no need for improving the shades and lines after some years – the patterns do not fade.

While describing the creation process of *tebori*, it is also worth mentioning the motifs and general topics of the designs. Unlike in the western modern tattooing, in which the only restrain of the selected subject matter is the imagination of the artist and the consent of the client, the Japanese traditional hand engraving has its own motifs divided into thematic groups. The iconography includes the variety of plants and animals appearing on the Japanese lands, religious illustrations of Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, and mythological stories[37]. The artists avoid using their skills to work on the projects unrelated to the mentioned motifs, as they believe that the traditional methods should be used to preserve the Japanese culture, not to sell the product. What is more, every creator has his own favorite depictions related to his personal convictions and artistic sense. For instance, Sousyu Hayashi prefers, as he named them, "powerful signs"; under this term he understands the motifs showing the power of nature (storm, wind), strong living creatures (wild birds, snakes and dragons), or the Japanese mythological characters (Daruma[38], Oni demons[39]). The appearance of the traditional patterns has been transferred from the master to the student during the apprenticeship, so that the final project is not entirely created by the tattooer himself – it is the compilation of the skills of the artist with his knowledge, observations, preferences, and cultural heritage he is aware of. Many of the

35 "Hayashi Sousyu." *HADAESHI Sousyu…* op. cit.

36 Ibidem.

37 A. Jelski. op. cit., p. 93.

38 H. N. McFarland. *Daruma: the founder of Zen in Japanese art and popular culture.* Tokyo, New York: Kodansha International, 1987. According to the legend, Daruma was a Buddhist monk, who introduced Zen teachings in Japan. Nowadays, his image is a part of popular culture, being sold in a form of a tumbling, eyeless doll bringing good luck to its owner.

39 S. Littleton. *Mądrość Wschodu: shinto.* Warsaw: Dogenes, 1998, p. 150. Oni demons are virulent mythological creatures, characterized by the org-like appearance and colorful (blue, red or green) skin.

completed projects, especially depicting the heroic deeds of samurai warriors, were based on the woodblock prints designed by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861) who is considered by the *tebori* artists to be the greatest contributor to their craft[40].

Finally, in his book Jelski lists twelve features of *tebori* that allow differentiating the patterns of the traditional Japanese art from the modern tattoo at the first glimpse[41]. Among other distinctive aspects, he underlines the intentional asymmetry of the picture, repeatability of the smaller motifs in one composition, and the usage of the vivid, contrasting colors[42]. While examining the designs thoroughly, it can be also noticed that the great amount of inspiration was taken from *ukio-e*[43] paintings[44]. The details, such as tiny peony flower motifs or the textures of the samurai warriors' gowns, are often copied from the historical depictions to emphasize the mutual development of both branches of Japanese traditional art.

## The meaning of tebori today

The lack of automatization and the amount of time required are the factors that make the described process unique. While the patterns can be copied and prepared by every modern artist with the use of a tattoo machine, it is the technique that matters the most. During the TattooFest in Kraków a huge amount of interest shown by the public was directed towards the tools. The potential customers even asked if the master was willing to use his method to make their preferred patterns, not related to Japanese culture at all. As the visitors later explained, they wanted to "feel that tool on their skin". Their questions were clearly depicting the performing potential of *tebori* and the need to experience the way the unique tools work. From the client's point of view, as well as from the artist's, the process is a form of meditation and cooperation that requires understanding and accepting the pain intangibly connected to the act.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that *tebori* art creating process is also exceptionally valuable in terms of preserving a great part of the Japanese cultural tradition, which is based on creating the relationship between the master and his apprentice. While undertaking the learning process, called *deshirii*, the student (traditionally named *Uchi-deshi*)[45] is obligated to live in his master's house and, beside gaining

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40 A. R. Newland. *Kuniyoshi: Japanese Master of Imagined Worlds.* Leiden: Hotei Publishing, 2013.

41 A. Jelski. op. cit., p. 93.

42 Ibidem.

43 Ukio-e is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints and paintings that emerged in the late 17th century. The most popular depictions showed scenes from Kabuki theater, samurai warriors, beautiful females and nature.

44 T. Kitamura. *Tattoos of the Floating World: Ukio-e Motifs in the Japanese Tattoo.* Amsterdam: Hotei Pub, 2003.

45 D. C. Falcaro. *Sogobujutsu: Psychology, Philosophy, Tradition.* Bloomington: iUniverse, 2012, p. 117. Literally means "an inside student". The author develops the meaning of the term: "The role of an Uchi-deshi is to have a life devotion to the art, as one as to the *Sensei* [a teacher]". Nowadays, the term *Uchi-deshi* also appears in the publications related to the history of Japanese martial arts. Therefore, as Falcaro observes, it no longer functions as a part of everyday language.

knowledge, helping him with everyday household chores[46]. That system arose around the 18th century Japanese artisans of many professions, but recently its remnants can be observed only in the case of tattooing and martial arts. The transfer of the tradition in the mentioned system proceeds a thorough observation and contemplation of the master's work by the apprentice[47]. The training and staying together under one roof might take even five years, as it was for the other great tattooer – Kazuo Oguri[48]. Describing his apprenticeship, Oguri, who gained his popularity after the World War II under the nickname Horihide, mentioned that this master-student relationship was a relic of the feudal customs[49]. As it was said before, Sousyu Hayashi had been learning for over ten years, but he did not spend that entire time on his mentor's premises. Nowadays, when it is not compulsory (and even not popular) in Japan to live as an apprentice in the house of the master in any line of business, cultivating the tradition of *tebori* became an interesting, thus worth observing, practice.

However, even though the artists strive to preserve the traditional tattoo making process and cultivate, to an extent they are able to do so in the modern world, the master-student relationships, the tension between the tradition and the needs of the modernized society can easily be noticed. As a tattooer Horiyoshi III indicated in one of the interviews:

> This is just my opinion, but there isn't a traditional tattooing in Japan anymore. In the old days, the needles and inks that tattooists used were closely guarded secrets. […] Tattoos were done on tatami mats by sunlight or candle light, using old tools.[50]

The clients, who are taught from the early years that full disinfection of tools requires a sterile environment, are not keen on decorating their bodies outside the walls of professional tattoo studios. To gain social acceptance and, at the same time, to be able to run the business, the *tebori* artists performing today try to match the expectations and, as Hayashi does, add non-traditional equipment (lamps, mats, foil to cover the fresh tattoo) to their accessories. What is more, the whole process is no longer a mystery, being described on the websites by the artists themselves as a part of the promotional technique. However, while the craftsmen are adopting some convenient solutions to modernize the hand engraving process in the eyes of the customers, their art still offers a unique experience, completely different from the contemporary tattooing.

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46 M. Delio Michelle. *Tatuaż. Egzotyczna sztuka dekorowania skóry.* Tr. Maria Lipińska, Warsaw: Warszawski Dom Wydawniczy, 1995, p. 72.

47 Ibidem.

48 Ibidem.

49 "Ancient Art of the Japanese Tebori Tattoo Masters." *Origink* .Spring 2012, Final Ed.: Digital, p. 24.

50 B. Ashcraft, B. Hori, op. cit., p. 13.

## Conclusion

During the TattooFest in Kraków, Sousyu Hayashi completed only one project. For over twenty hours he had been decorating the leg of his future student for whom the whole process was a form of initiation into the craft. While working, the tattoo master was gently describing his actions, answering questions and demonstrating the tools to the audience. But, regardless of the history and the complexity of *tebori* that the visitors of the Convention were not able to learn throughout the short meeting, the greatest sensation was brought by the tools used by the performer. In the hustle and bustle of the Festival, gathering almost three hundred artists from fifty countries, people stopped by and contemplated dexterous, rhythmical moves of Hayashi who was creating traditional art using a simple bamboo stick with needles.

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## Summary

The purpose of this article is to describe the uniqueness of the traditional Japanese tattooing method – *tebori*. The presented material combines data obtained during the research conducted by the author on the 11th TattooFest in Kraków, when she spent two days helping the *tebori* master Sousyu Hayashi to communicate with the audience. The article focuses mainly on the importance of the tools used by the master during his work and the meaning of them in the process. Moreover, the author presents a brief history of the hand engraving in Japan and the changes brought by the modernization of life.